

**Testimony for the Texas Senate Select Committee on Education Reform
& Public School Finance
February 6, 2006**

**IMPROVING POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS and COLLEGE READINESS for
ALL TEXAS STUDENTS**

Thank you for the invitation to meet with you today. I am Karen Pennell, Assistant Vice President and Southwest Regional Manager, for ACT, Inc. a national independent, not-for-profit organization providing research, information, program management services, and over a hundred assessments in the areas of education and workforce development. Since 1959, ACT's mission has been to help people achieve education and workplace success.

An essential foundation for all of ACT's services is empirical research. We have one of the most extensive databases in the country on postsecondary readiness that helps inform and guide policymakers, students, parents, and teachers about what is required for postsecondary success. Every three years, ACT conducts its National Curriculum Survey[®] where we ask more than 30,000 educators nationwide from middle school teachers to college faculty to identify the knowledge and skills that are important for students to know to be ready for college-level work. We have also established College Readiness Benchmarks[®] starting at the 8th grade through the 12th grade based on empirical research derived from the actual performance of students in college. Additionally, we have developed College Readiness Standards[®] in response to the need for better information about student achievement and to answer the often-asked question, What does a given score on EXPLORE[®], PLAN[®], or the ACT[®] really mean? The College Readiness Standards serve as a direct link or roadmap between what students have learned and what they are ready to learn next.

ACT has partnered with other national organizations such as the Education Trust, the National Governor's Association, and Achieve to further define what college readiness really means and what we can do to get all students college ready. Based on this extensive research, we can provide an Action Plan for Texas to create a seamless transition from middle school to high school to college for all students. The reason we can do this and be confident in our recommendations is that through national empirical research and actual proven results from

numerous state-wide programs and school districts, we know what works to get all students prepared for postsecondary success.

I would like to focus on three main areas of concern in Texas

- How do we get all Texas students college ready?
- How do we align the Texas curriculum to ensure postsecondary success?
- What specific Action Items can Texas adopt to get more students prepared for postsecondary success?

HOW DO WE GET ALL TEXAS STUDENTS COLLEGE READY?

Early academic planning and preparation are essential for college readiness. Starting in the 8th grade, students should begin planning for college, take rigorous courses, and monitor their progress toward being college ready. ACT research strongly supports the need for an integrated, longitudinal data-driven system to provide order and continuity to school, district, and state efforts. All students should be provided guidance and feedback – **early and often**. Evaluating students' strengths and weaknesses early in the 8th grade provides a foundation from which to improve knowledge and skills that are necessary for college readiness. They must have specific benchmarks to reach and hopefully exceed. If students, parents, and teachers do not have a roadmap, how can they get where they want to go?

ACT has established College Readiness Benchmarks and College Readiness Standards at the 8th/9th, 10th, and 11th/12th grades using our Educational Planning and Assessment System[®] (EPAS). EPAS consists of three aligned programs **all on the same score scale**:

- EXPLORE, for students in grades 8 and 9, provides baseline information on the academic preparation of students that is used to plan high school coursework and promote early career planning.
- PLAN, for students in grade 10, provides a midpoint review of students' progress toward their education and career goals while there is still time to make necessary interventions.
- The ACT, for students in grades 11 and 12, measures students' academic readiness to make successful transitions to college and work after high school. The ACT is the most widely accepted and used test by postsecondary institutions

across the U.S. for college admission and college course placement in entry-level college courses such as English and math.

All three components of EPAS (EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT) measure student achievement because each is firmly based in the curriculum of the grade level for which it is intended. EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT were specifically designed and validated for each appropriate grade level. In other words, all of ACT's college readiness assessments are curriculum-based achievement tests. Each test informs students what they know and can do at various critical points in their middle and high school years, what they are ready to learn next, and what they need to improve upon. Because ACT's college readiness assessments are curriculum-based, the results are also used for college course placement in four subject areas.

What sets ACT assessments as well as ACT as an organization apart from others is best described by a quote from ACT's founder, E.F. Lindquist, the preeminent scholar and practitioner in educational measurement:

"The examination should describe the student in meaningful terms – meaningful to the student, the parent, and the middle and high school teacher – meaningful in the sense that the scores correspond to recognizable school activities, and directly suggest appropriate distributions of emphasis in learning and teaching."

ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum ACT test scores required for students to have a high probability for success in college courses. These Benchmarks are meaningful because they allow students, parents, and educators as early as the 8th grade (EXPLORE) to know if they are on course for college readiness in four subject areas – English, social sciences, math, and science. At the 10th grade (PLAN), we can determine if students need additional work to meet the college readiness Benchmark in four academic areas and if they are on course for success. And, again at the 11th/12th grade we have the final college readiness benchmark with the ACT to determine if students can be successful in their college-level courses or if they are bound for developmental work.

How can ACT make this determination? The College Readiness Benchmarks were empirically derived based on the actual performance of students in college using actual course grade information. As part of its Course Placement Service, ACT provides research services to colleges to help them place students in entry-level courses. In providing this service, ACT has developed an extensive database consisting of course grade and test score data from a large number of first-year students across a wide range of postsecondary institutions. These data provide an overall measure of what it takes to be successful in first year college courses. Data from 98 colleges and universities and over 90,000 students were used to establish the College Readiness Benchmarks.

Several states are successfully preparing their students to be college ready by using the EPAS system, the College Readiness Benchmarks, and the College Readiness Standards. States that have seen increased test scores, more college ready students, decreased remediation costs, and more underrepresented populations entering college include Illinois, Colorado, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and West Virginia. Additional recent EPAS adoptions include Michigan, Minnesota and Kentucky.

In Texas, I would like to highlight some school districts who are seeing great results in using all or part of EPAS: Laredo ISD, San Antonio ISD, Wimberly ISD, and Edinburg ISD to name a few. These data-driven districts are not only starting early in helping their students become college ready but are seeing increased test scores, more rigorous course taking by students, and more students planning on enrolling in college.

HOW DO WE ALIGN THE CURRICULUM TO ENSURE POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS?

First, we have to acknowledge that Exit TAKS measures basic high school outcomes. ACT's EPAS measures college readiness. There is a difference and a gap. To erase this gap all schools must provide a rigorous academic curriculum for all students.

Through the National Curriculum Survey that ACT conducts every three years and through the State Standards Alignment Studies completed with 36 states (including Texas) we have learned that embedding college readiness indicators in curriculum and assessments is essential to student success. Many states are using ACT's College Readiness Standards and the College

Readiness Benchmarks as their foundation in articulating what all college freshmen should know and be able to do upon entering college. These Readiness Standards are essentially the roadmap for students to become college ready. They directly relate and are aligned to the current Texas TEKS curriculum. In fact, TEKS is a very comprehensive and rigorous curriculum. The disconnect is not the curriculum but what is actually being expected of students in the classroom. Texas must define what their college readiness expectations are – boldly and clearly – for all students. If expectations are not defined, you can't get what you don't ask for!

Using ACT's National College Readiness Standards as a baseline, we would recommend that Texas review and evaluate the rigor and alignment of courses offered in high school English, math, social studies, and science to ensure that the foundational skills leading to college readiness are articulated and taught to all students.

We would also recommend that Texas incorporate complex reading materials into all courses, not just English and social studies; students must have the opportunity to read such materials across the curriculum so that they are better positioned to comprehend complex texts in all subjects once they enter college. Finally, require all students to take specific courses that include: one or more advanced math courses beyond Algebra II; and Chemistry and Physics. Texas is one of five states that are requiring all high school students to take a rigorous high school curriculum and we commend you for your actions.

ACTION PLAN FOR TEXAS

We have provided a specific action plan to accomplish the goal of achieving postsecondary success and college readiness for all Texas students in the last section of our handout. This Action Plan has specific action steps with five major headings:

- Create a Common Focus for Getting All Students Prepared for Postsecondary Success
- Establish High Expectations for ALL Students Beginning Prior to a Student Entering High School
- Require a Rigorous Curriculum and Define Your College Readiness Expectations for ALL Students
- Include a Student Guidance Component

- Measure and Evaluate Progress Using a Longitudinally Connected Program Beginning in Grade 8

ACT is uniquely positioned to assist Texas in their goal of getting all Texas students college ready. Through our extensive college readiness research and proven record of success in large-scale state adoptions, ACT is ready to assist Texas in meeting your goals.

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